Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 14: Emergency Preparedness and Disabled People

Guests: Alecia Deon and Angela Wrigglesworth

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by Cheryl Green

For more information: https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast/

Introduction

[melancholy classical music]

[wind howls, birds call]

ALECIA DEON: I think we had three or four days before it actually got to us. By the time we realized, OK, this is a serious emergency, people have already started panicking.

ANGELA WRIGGLESWORTH: At that point, when I hit post, it was like my world just exploded with people attempting to rescue us.

[hip hop]

LATEEF: This is the Disability Visibility Podcast with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE: Hello hello! I'm Alice Wong, the host of Disability Visibility Podcast, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media.

Today's episode is about emergency preparedness and disabled people. 2017 has been a trying year in more ways than one. This summer and fall we've seen multiple hurricanes and wildfires across the United States and the Caribbean. Evacuation and preparedness doesn't look the same for people with disabilities, and you'll hear about it with my two guests, Alecia Deon and Angela Wrigglesworth.

Alecia lives in the Miami area and did not evacuate during Hurricane Irma and shared with me why she stayed at home. Angela, a resident of Houston, shared her story evacuating out of her home during Hurricane Harvey as the waters reached into her home. You'll hear in detail Alecia and Angela's emotions, decision-making processes, choices, and risks as they faced these two natural disasters.

Are you ready? [electronic beeping] Away we go!

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1!

Alecia Deon Interview

ALICE: Alecia, thank you so much for being on my podcast today.

ALECIA: Thanks for having me. I'm so happy to be here with you. So, I was born in Jamaica. I immigrated here when I was younger. I've been here maybe 20 years now, and I have sickle cell anemia. I think I'm trying to connect more with being disabled and what that means for me,

given my culture, given my background and my history as a disabled person who's also Black and also queer and also these other intersections.

ALICE: You recently experienced Hurricane Irma.

ALECIA: We were kinda directly in its path, and it switched from the East coast of Florida to the West coast of Florida. I live in the county right above Miami. I'm sitting at home while my parents are work, trying to think about OK, well, what can I do to try to prepare? There isn't much when you physically can't.

There is some kind of registry in my county for people that are disabled. So, I think I registered with that online. It doesn't guarantee that they're gonna come get you or help you evacuate or anything. I looked up where all of the shelters were in relation to my home, which one was closest, what we would need to bring in the event that we left.

Just to give you an idea of what we're dealing with: OK, so, my county is the 6th largest public-school county in Florida, or I think in the country. So, a lot of people panicking all at the same time, trying to access the same resources. So, just the physical energy it would've taken to pack my things up to go and stand in these enormous lines, possibly having to sleep on the floor or on a cot, I would've ended up in a sickle cell crisis, and needing to go to a hospital or needing to have access to resources that I doubt I would've been able to access.

Everyone is tweeting me: “Oh, can you get to a airport? Oh, can you get to a shelter? Can you do this?” And it's like, No, I can't! I physically cannot. People outside are looking in and giving their opinions and it was a lot.

ALICE: I think a lot of people don't realize that people like you and me, anytime we go anywhere, especially overnight, it's like people have no idea how much of a production that is.

ALECIA: [laughs] Right!?

When I go into a sickle cell crisis, it's instantly an emergency situation. Usually, when I start feeling that pain, I have like less than an hour to get to what I need. Stress is a trigger. The weather, anytime it starts to rain, my joints, my back, everything kind of seizes up and locks up. So, I'm actively trying to not stress myself out and not worry and ignore the fact that this thing is bearing down on me.

ALICE: One thing that people always say that I read in a lot of these emergency preparedness literature: They say oh, stockpile your medications.

ALECIA: [laughs]

ALICE: I'm glad you laughed because--

ALECIA: That's the funniest thing I've ever heard, honestly.

ALICE: I know. "Always have an extra supply of medications." I'm like, are you on Medicaid? I don't think so!

ALECIA: [laughs]

[melancholy classical music]

Evacuations, resources, and the online response to Alecia not evacuating

NEWSCASTER: Preparations are hard to get right now. Here's one of many, many gas stations in South Florida where there are no cars here because there is no gas here. Every single pump: No gas, no gas, no gas.

NEWSCASTER: And take a look here at this Public's grocery store where all the sports drinks and water would be, the shelves almost already completely empty.

ALICE: I read a quote by you in a piece from Think Progress on September 8th, 2017. You, through your tweets, said consistently how it's not easy to evacuate, and you got a lot of reactions and criticism online.

ALECIA: I got angry [chuckles] at someone who, I can't remember what they said. I think it was something to the effect of pretty much, "Don't feel sorry for those people who aren't evacuating because they aren't evacuating, and it's their fault." To really outline what I was experiencing and having to sit there for four days. My parents are at work. These are the people that I rely on heavily for a lot of the things that I need, and they're at work. If they say they're gonna leave work to go and get supplies, they get fired, and they don't have to have a reason for firing them. And just seeing how unwilling people were a) to listen, and b) to show any kind of sympathy or empathy for the situation.

Florida is nine hours long, possibly more, and people were stuck on the highway. From where I live to go to, say, Tampa or Orlando, it takes three or four hours. People were on the highway for 12+ hours to get to those places. That's physically not feasible for me.

ALICE: It is an evacuation privilege, right?

ALECIA: Mmhmm.

ALICE: Let's unpack that privilege that people assume everybody has.

ALECIA: Right. So, there are people right now who are struggling to pay their rent, have food, have a car, put gas in it, get to work. What we would consider very basic necessities, people are struggling with that on a daily basis. They don't have an extra couple hundred dollars to go and buy supplies.

Jet Blue, for instance, everybody kept sending me Jet Blue was saying $99 for tickets out of Florida, right? OK. You have to remember that this is still capitalism, and it's still a business. Say they offer $99 out, but when it's time to come back, is it still gonna be $99? It's only a one-way ticket when it's an emergency situation like that. It's a one-way ticket. Where are you gonna stay? What are you gonna eat? How long will you be missing work?

So, there were people being very, very mean and saying very harsh things. It was mostly people that I'm mutuals with on Twitter that were in my mentions trying to defend me and say, "Well, obviously she just explained that she can't leave for these reasons." It's like people can't fathom what that means when I say I can't leave.

ALICE: And there's also a level of judgment, right?

ALECIA: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

ALICE: You deserve whatever you get.

ALECIA: Right. Exactly! That is exactly it.

[distorted ambient music]

Riding out the hurricane with family

ALICE: So, what was it like for you and your parents when you rode out the hurricane?

ALECIA: Honestly, that's the most family time I've had in months because of how much my parents work. But we were all sitting in the living room, and my dad was telling me the story of one of the worst hurricanes that hit Jamaica, which was Gilbert, and I wanna say that was '88 or '89, and my mom was actually pregnant with me. He's a very funny person. He's telling me this story while Irma is outside just like wreaking havoc, and we're trying to disconnect from that and trying to pay attention to something else and just getting to laugh and enjoy that moment.

And then also realizing wow, I hate capitalism. I hate all of these things because our lives are literally in danger, and that's the only reason that we really get to spend this time with each other. Because normally somebody's at work, or someone's tired or whatever the case is. So, it was very mixed. But I did enjoy getting to spend that time with them.

ALICE: Did you experience any damage, or did you run out of your medication?

ALECIA: The path of the hurricane switched so drastically, there was really no damage where I lived. What did happen was there were a lot of trees down. They were pulled up by the root and turned over. And like I said, we lost power, I think for three or four days. So, I was staying hydrated, trying not to stress. I experienced some back pain and joint pain just because of the rain. But for the most part, I was OK.

[upbeat ambient music]

Recommendations for planning for emergencies for people with disabilities

ALICE: What are some recommendations or changes you'd like to see in the way local and state authorities plan for emergencies and evacuations?

ALECIA: Because of just the physical limitations of the landscape and all of that, I don't know what they could do better. It's the action of trying to work a little bit earlier. I think that becomes the issue, just not having those resources stockpiled. So, it's always the resources and being able to help people that are disabled. And that registry for instance. Like I said, I just put my name on it. There should be some kind of action that's taken to focus on people who we know are going to be affected: Poor folks, people with disabilities, certain populations that do not have the means to protect themselves.

And we don't protect these people every day. If we help people be able to live well on a normal, everyday basis, that would better enable them to be able to protect themselves a little bit more. But that's talking about a whole deconstruction and reconfiguration of our society in the way it thinks, in the way it operates. And I don't necessarily see that happening. Because I need these changes to happen now, and they're not happening now, it's disheartening, and it's sad. And I have to deal with the realities of needing things that I don't have access to. So, it's very hard to walk that line and say, "Oh, I think if we did x, y, z, it would be better to help folks prepare," but I want it to be a situation where the most vulnerable don't get left behind.

ALICE: Yeah. I think that's the one thing about natural disasters is that it does put a spotlight and really shows really clearly the inequality.

ALECIA: Mmhmm. Absolutely.

ALICE: We are seen as disposable in a lot of ways.

ALECIA: Exactly. Exactly.

ALICE: That's how it plays out in the way services are provided, in the way we're treated by governments and organizations and healthcare. So, it starts with our culture, I think.

ALECIA: Yeah, absolutely.

ALICE: But it is hard. It is hard. And your observations and your voice is very powerful.

ALECIA: Thank you. Thank you!

ALICE: So, yeah, thank you so much for talking with me today.

ALECIA: Thank you so much for doing this. I feel like this is so special for disabled people, for myself, especially in a moment where I'm saying I'm tired of being silent, and I'm tired of not being heard. Just the opportunity to do this with you has been amazing.

[electronic ambient music]

Angela Wrigglesworth Interview

ALICE: So, Angela, thank you so much for joining me on the podcast today. Why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself?

ANGELA: Well, thanks for having me. I am a 40-year-old native Houstonian. I live in the city of Houston with my boyfriend, and I teach third grade. I've been a teacher for 18 years. I just have a really happy life. I have a disease called Spinal Muscular Atrophy Type 2. I'm very weak upper and lower body. I use a motorized wheelchair for mobility.

ALICE: In relation to the path of Hurricane Harvey, where were you in terms of where it hit?

ANGELA: We live in a little one-story house. It was built in 1953, and it has never, ever flooded, ever. We're probably no more than 10 or 15 minutes from literally downtown where all the big buildings are. So, we're very much in the city. We also live off of a rather large bayou called Brays Bayou. And typically, when Houston is on the news for any flooding, Brays Bayou is one that's heavily mentioned. It's literally flooded three years in a row, just kind of in a devastating way for many of the neighborhoods in our area. We're about four blocks off of Brays Bayou, but again our house has never flooded before.

We had survived the two floods the years prior and so, kind of just thought we were going to be stranded in our house for a few days. It was just one of those things that we thought well, we'll make it through it, kind of like we do all the time. I survived every hurricane since 1977, having stayed in the city.

When the hurricane hit on Saturday, we really weren't getting any of the bands. Like truly, we took the dog for a walk on Saturday afternoon. And then [chuckles] as Saturday night rolled around, and that's when the feeder bands started hitting us. And it was just raining, just constantly pouring and pouring.

And so, we stayed up till about 2:30 in the morning, and the water had definitely come up above into the yard. But it does that almost every time it rains where we live. At 5:30 in the morning, my boyfriend, Justin, came and woke me up and said, "We need to put you in your wheelchair. We need to get you up." And, to be really honest with you, that was probably the second most frightening moment: To know that he felt a sense of urgency that staying in bed was no longer safe. At that point, the water still wasn't up to the house, but it had definitely kind of covered most of the yard.

And in typical Texas style, I wanted to save my cowboy boots. So, I had him put them up high on a piece of furniture. It's so cliché and ridiculous, but I really wanted to save my boots. And other than that, we just kept looking at each other and thought you know, everything in here is just stuff, and it can be replaced. It's OK.

So, he taped the front door with duct tape really heavily because the water was again, getting close. Probably by, I don't even know, around 10:00 in the morning, I realized as we were watching the news—because we had power the entire time—we're watching the news, and literally there were people up on their roofs already in Houston. And I cannot get up on a roof. And so, I realized, OK, we need to evacuate. And at that point it's clearly too late as the streets—we're on a corner; our house is on a corner—both of the streets at our house were just a river. I mean it was all the way up to our home.

And so, I started calling 911, and I couldn't get through and started making a few other phone calls to other organizations that people had kind of posted on Facebook. And all of them said, you know, "We'll put you on a list. You're on a list, but if you can, get to your roof." And no one can understand my circumstances unless they're literally looking at me. But obviously, getting on a roof is never, ever, ever going to happen. And so, at that point it was about noon. I had tried for a good two hours to get through to the authorities for help, and we were just told to just wait and be put on the list and do the best we can. And you'll laugh at me because Justin is a fisherman, and so he had some life jackets. So, I literally was sitting in my house in a life jacket.

ALICE: No, no, that's very sensible. It sounds sensible.

ANGELA: [chuckles] Please know that this life jacket was never going to save my life. Like it was four times too big for me. I could have slipped out, but at the same time for some reason it just brought me a little bit of comfort to have this life jacket on. At that point, I realized I've got to let my parents know. We let Justin's parents know; we called them in Tennessee to tell them that I was gonna post on Facebook that we needed help. Around noon, I posted, and I just as calmly as I could, I explained that we were OK, and we were safe at present. But we were concerned at the rate as to which the water was rising, and so we needed to get out.

At that point, Justin went into the back room. And he came back from our bedroom, and he said we have water in the house. And we never imagined that the water was gonna come from the back. The bayou is in front of our home.

When the water first comes in your home, it's devastating, and it just kind of rocks you emotionally. Both of us are religious people, and we sat in our living room, and we just prayed over our home. And it just kept coming in. At that point, we were just so desperate for help.

[rain pouring down, emergency vehicle sirens in the distance; then acoustic guitar music with a driving beat]

Help finally arriving in Hurricane Harvey

NEWSCASTER: Thousands have been left stranded by the storm, as first responders scramble to save them by boat, by truck, [chopper blades roar] and by helicopter.

ANGELA: It took about, I would say about six hours before that help finally was able to arrive. The first wave of help was, there was about seven firefighters that all the sudden were trudging across our yard in thigh-deep water. I was like, “Oh my gosh this is it. This is our moment. We're being saved. Thank God.”

They came in, and they were just so wonderful and assessed the situation and asked me what was the best way to help transfer me, what I needed. And then they said, “But we don't have the vehicle here yet to rescue you. But you're on the, you're truly on the top of the list. As soon as the high-water vehicle gets here, we're coming to get you.”

So, I said, “OK, that's great, but I literally have probably 50 people who said that they have a boat and that they're on their way. What do I do? Do I wait for y’all, or do I go ahead and get on whatever mode of transportation comes to rescue us?” And they said, “Don't wait. Get out whatever you can do to save yourself. You don't need to wait for us, but just know we will come back for you.”

[acoustic guitar with driving beat]

Probably about 15, 20 minutes later three military guys—I think they were part of the Marines perhaps—literally paddled up in a kayak [chuckles]. Like there's just no way that I could’ve safely transferred into it. And had that kayak toppled over, which it very easily could because the water was rushing—it looked like a river outside of our home—that would have been it. And so, whereas I was so grateful that they had come, we went ahead and turned down their help.

Probably another hour later, a friend of mine called and said, "Angela, my friend has a Bass Pro fishing boat. We have a snorkel Jeep." And a snorkel Jeep is one of those Jeeps that's just so high off the ground, but in addition, the exhaust pipe is turned up like a snorkel so that it can go through really high water and not be flooded out. And she said, "And we are coming to you, and we will be there in minutes."

So, she and her friend show up, and they they can't make it any further than halfway down the street. And they launch the boat that was up on the trailer, and they bring the boat down to our house. But truly this guy who owned the boat and his buddy that were there, they were just amazing. He and my boyfriend transferred me into the boat, and then they picked up my wheelchair and put it on the bow of the boat. And our cat got in, in her little cat crate, and our big old hound dog got in the back. And my boyfriend sat next to me and held me as we were brought to safety, floating down the river what was once our street.

ALICE: That must have been surreal.

ANGELA: It honestly was. And my bones are extremely breakable. I fractured both my femurs last November. So, I was terrified that I was going to break something else, even just in the transfer process. And they could not have done a better job. I felt so safe.

[motorboat engine chugs]

Social media and rescue from natural disasters

ALICE: What would you like to say in terms of the power of social media, in terms of rescue and natural disasters?

ANGELA: I definitely would say Houston doesn't get credit for being the size that it is. We're the fourth largest city in the nation. There are millions and millions and millions of people here in the city. There's no way to safely move that number of people out of the city, as we experienced during a hurricane nine years prior, or however many years ago it was, that people died on the road. So, in reality, there was nothing that could really have been done.

And so, social media gave me the ability to ask for help and to receive it in a short, very dramatic period of time. At last count, my post has been shared that day about 5000 times. And the fact that a perfect stranger brought his boat to come and save me, it's really amazing. I'm so grateful for social media and for Facebook and all of the different other ways in which our story was shared. Because unfortunately, our first responders, they were at max. They were doing the very best that they could to save hundreds and thousands of people.

I don't think the system failed me under any circumstances. I never felt abandoned. Like I knew that I was on a list. I knew that people were trying to help me, our first responders and our national guard. So, I never have felt like my city or my government didn't do enough.

How things are now

ALICE: And how are you doing now?

ANGELA: Thank you for asking. That's a good question. Well, I did turn 40 while we stayed at the hotel, which was not how I expected to spend my 40th birthday. But we got back into our home, and we had to take a lot of the sheet rock and the baseboards out. But it is livable. We'll have to move out come November for about three weeks to have all of the repairs and everything done.

Honestly, our circumstances were so mild in comparison to what so many people faced and are still facing now. The rebuilding, it has been where you get down and dirty with life, and you're challenged with having to go back to work but at the same time needing to rebuild your personal life and your home. And that takes a lot. But all of us here in Houston are very strong, and it's a remarkable community.

ALICE: OK, here's the important question: How are your cowboy boots?

ANGELA: Ah, yes, my cowboy boots! We got back into the house, and they were still propped up high on the chest of drawers. I was so grateful. For me there's something about those cowboy boots that just make me feel really, I don't know, like myself. And I knew that was gonna be important when all of this was over. I knew that ultimately, I would just wanna feel like myself again, and those boots are a big part of it.

ALICE: Well, thank you so much Angela, for sharing your story of your rescue and recovery.

ANGELA: Well, I'm thankful to you. I'm glad to tell my story and also just have a way of saying thank you to as many people as I can who were there for us that day. Whether I know you or I don't, please know how much you touched my heart and how I will never forget the kindness and generosity of everyone on social media that day.

Wrap-up

[hip-hop]

ALICE: Since this is the last episode for 2017, I want to take a moment to express my gratitude to the many people who make this podcast possible. Thank you to my audio producers: Geraldine Ah-Sue, Sarika D. Mehta, and Cheryl Green. To folks who donated their time, money, and expertise. And to you, the listeners out there who are make up this awesome community.

I have so many exciting episodes coming up in 2018 and cannot wait to share them with you. Thank you again, and happy holidays.

This podcast is a production of the Disability Visibility Project, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes including text transcripts are available at disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast/.

You can find more info about emergency preparedness, Alecia, and Angela on our website.

The audio producer for this episode is Cheryl Green. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Thanks for listening and see YOU on the Internets! Byeeeee!